

CAROL SOARES

THE
MONSTROUS
FEMININE

TALES OF
BEAUTY AND
HORROR



The Monstrous Feminine : Tales of Beauty and Horror

By Carol Soares

The Doll and Her Girl

This is a love story.

Some may say otherwise but pay no attention to them, pay attention to me, as my sweet Julia did.

Love had not been kind to me up until this point. I had a few owners before my Julia, girls who seemed nice at first, who brushed my hair and admired the beauty of the porcelain that formed my body and the delicacy of my clothes and hat. But who in the end proved themselves to be the opposite and ended up breaking my heart. And putting me in a position that forced me to break their hearts, too.

For my Julia, finding me was a discovery, but for me it was a rescue.

A nosy old woman had found a way to trap me, to leave me in the darkness with nothing but my memories for company.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, only enough to know that the nosy old hag was dead and her evil spells long forgotten. My girl opened the box by breaking the seal on the outside, and from that moment on I was hers. And only hers forever.

She took me in her arms, and held me as if I were a baby. She showed me the house I already knew, telling me how she and her mother had just moved there to be closer to her grandmother who was sick.

She called me Olivia. That wasn't the name I had before, but I didn't mind. A new name seemed like something that could be good, it meant a new beginning, a new life — and I definitely needed one of those.

She took me to her room and served me water, pretending it was tea in a small cup. She combed my hair, untangling the strands with a gentleness that had so rarely been shown to me.

Brushing off the dust, she told me that she had never seen a porcelain doll with brown eyes and brown hair like hers, that they were almost always blonde-haired and blue-eyed. And Julia took one of the dresses from another doll and put it on me, saying that since I was the prettiest of the dolls I deserved the prettiest dress.

The other times I had been more cautious, waited a little longer. But something made me trust her even on that first day, so I gently sent my thoughts in her

direction, letting her know that there really was someone there, someone listening.

She could have screamed, as others had done in the past, but instead she smiled.

It would have been a perfect moment if her mother hadn't walked in at that instant and said:

"Where did you find that *thing*?"

The *thing* she was referring to was quite obviously me. Can you blame me for not liking the woman?

"In the attic."

"You shouldn't have gone up there alone. I haven't had time to clean it yet; there might be rats."

"I didn't see any rats."

And it should have ended like that, but she kept talking and talking and talking, and every word made my little girl feel worse, and that horrible woman didn't seem to care.

And even after she left, my Julia continued to feel sad.

That night she put me on her bedside table before falling asleep, and I watched her until she woke up again.

For a week my days were heaven on earth, with her spending every waking hour and sleeping beside me. She would take me to the dinner table and to watch movies in front of the television in the living room. We would play and sometimes I would let my thoughts go to her, and I would tell her things about my past, the cruelties and indignities that this life had made me suffer, and I would tell her how grateful I felt for her, for that spring in my soul after such a long hard winter.

But school started and Julia's mother wouldn't let her take me with her.

We were apart for just a few hours, but I had become so unaccustomed to being alone. In just the first few weeks it became clear that life was so boring during the hours she was at school, and the house so empty and so different from what it was when I was stuck in the box.

Julia's mother was also out at that time, so I started exploring the house. It was hard to move, it took a

lot of concentration, I had to use a lot of who I was before this porcelain body, before another nosy old woman, the first one, put me here, but I did it.

Sometimes I went into the other rooms, but most of the time I went to the windows to watch my little girl coming home, and she would see me and come running to find me no matter which window I was at.

In retrospect, I admit it was foolish of me, because I should have realized that if my little girl noticed my little walks around the house, her mother would notice too.

One day she arrived before Julia and found me at one of the windows, she took me to the trash can on the street corner and threw me out without ceremony.

I tried to move the lid to get out, but it was too heavy, moving in general was already so difficult.

And my little girl was too far away for my thoughts to reach her and ask her to come rescue me. It felt like the end.

But she came anyway, like an angel, like the heroine of a fairytale ready to save her damsel in distress, and she hid me in her backpack and told me I had to stay there so her mother wouldn't throw me in the trash again.

At school she would take me out of the backpack and show me to her friends, some of them seemed beautiful, some intelligent, some kind, but none as much as my little girl. And maybe we could have continued like this forever, but another nosy old hag showed up.

I don't know how these horrible women keep finding me, they are the plague of my existence, they are the ones who trap me in pieces of cloth and boxes to rot while time keeps passing and passing.

I was in the backpack, hiding and waiting for the hours when I could be with my little girl again... when I heard a voice I didn't recognize. Initially it was too far for me to be sure of what was being said, but it soon approached.

"It's closer now, there's something very wrong here." said the voice that until then I had never heard.

And all around there were sounds of doors and drawers being opened and rummaged through. I wasn't that scared until I heard the alarming sound of the backpack being unzipped.

Julia's mother screamed when she saw me, the nosy old woman next to her looked at me coldly.

"What are you screaming about?" the old woman said.

And Julia's mother went on to tell a horrible story full of words like *creepy* and *possession*, making the beautiful months I spent in the company of my little girl seem like something out of a horror story.

The old hag told Julia's mother not to worry, that she was going to get rid of me. And then my little girl, who had been listening to everything behind the door, started crying and protesting that it wasn't fair, that I was her friend.

Even from outside the house I could hear my little girl still crying as the old woman took me away.

We arrived at the hag's house, she took me to the backyard, poured alcohol on me, lit a match and then set me on fire.

The flames reminded me of old things, lost things, things I desperately didn't want to remember. But with this also came the knowledge of how to rise from the ashes. With the fire came freedom.

I waited some time before I could begin to rebuild myself. I could have remade my body in many ways, but I chose the same form I had been in before, after all, it was with that appearance that my Julia knew and loved me.

And then I moved, much more easily than before, with a body that was truly mine now. A part of me wanted to go straight to my girl, but I didn't, after all it wasn't just for her that I came back, but also for the old woman.

I always come back, especially when I have something to come back for. Be it love or its opposite. And such cruelty could not be ignored.

It was much easier than I thought it would be.

I didn't have to do anything more than show up at the kitchen door, and let my thoughts invade the old woman's mind to make her heart stop.

It's not my fault she possessed such a weak heart.

The old hag's body was found by one of her neighbors in the morning, stiff and cold on the ground, and they found me next to her.

Men came to take her body away soon after. And just before dusk, Julia's mother came, grabbed me by the arm as if touching something putrid and took me out to the street, to do again what she had done before, throw me in the trash.

But this time I didn't let her. I sent my thoughts to her, not gently like a caress like I did with my Julia but like a knife, so that only my voice could be heard in her mind.

And from that moment on, she finally understood what the price would be for being someone who meddles in things that are none of her business.

Now my little girl puts me on the nightstand, kisses my forehead and wishes me good night.

Julia's mother watches our little ritual from the doorway. It's quite clear she still hates me, but she learned the vital lesson that it would not be in her best interest to stand in the way of true love.

The lights go out and I stare at my little girl until
daylight breaks and she wakes up.

This is a happy ending.

Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Impure

“I’m sorry, Miss Yeon, but there’s nothing I can do to get you out of your apartment lease,” the woman across the table says to me. “Not for the next six months, at least.”

She does sound like she’s really sorry, but I can sense the irritation behind the regret.

This is the third time she’s spoken to me in five days, and I’m being annoying and persistent. I’m not being the dream tenant she always said I was, the one who rented the first apartment she showed me and always paid in advance for the past three years, and who two months earlier had signed the lease renewal agreement, accepting all the adjustments without making any demands.

I feel a certain shame about this, and also shame for the simple fact of feeling ashamed, for caring what this woman I interact with only for business reasons thinks of me.

Mom wouldn’t feel this way, or any of my sisters.

I can’t help but think that in my place they would have gotten out of the damn lease, but of course:

none of them would find themselves in this situation in the first place.

“If the problem is money, maybe we could negotiate payments in installments or something,” she says.

“It’s not money. I just want a place closer to my college. That’s all.”

She looks at me like she doesn’t believe me. I don’t know what it is about older women that always lets them see right through me. She can see that I’m lying, even though she’s wrong about why.

She would laugh if she knew why. And she probably wouldn’t understand. On many levels, I don’t understand myself.

I should be above this stuff...

But five days ago, instead of going to class like I’d intended when I got out of bed that morning, I went to the real estate agent and asked to be released from my apartment contract.

Because when I left the apartment, I met my new neighbor. He smiled at me between the moving

boxes, introduced himself, putting them down just to shake my hand, there was sweat running down his forehead and I could see the pulse in the artery in his neck. Then he smiled, and since that moment I haven't been able to stop thinking about him.

About his skin, about his neck, about how it would feel to have him under me. How foul it feels to desire something this much.

And because of that I have to leave that place.

"I understand, thank you for trying," I finally say and leave.

For the past few days I've been staying in a hotel room on the other side of the city, but tonight I'll have to go back to the apartment. Mrs. Gabino, who lives down the hall, has an extra key to my apartment for emergencies, but she said she wouldn't be able to feed my dog, Rufus, like she did over the last few days because she is going away on a work trip, and I can't let him go hungry just because of my shameful personal desires.

When I get to the building I take the stairs instead of the elevator, with each step I think about him... not my dog, but the man in the apartment next

door, about ringing his doorbell, throwing myself at him and hoping for the best. Mom always said it would happen one day and I didn't believe her, I believed that maybe that kind of desire hadn't been passed on to me, that maybe I could really be pure.

I arrive and Rufus comes up to me, licks my face while his tail wags. When I thought about him here, I only thought about things like water, food and the feces on the newspaper to be cleaned up, but now I realize he must have been very confused by my absence.

"I'm so sorry, honey." I say and touch him behind his ear.

I put the food in the bowl, change the water and put the dirty newspapers in a bag and replace them with new ones. And for a second I feel really good about myself.

Then I hear footsteps in the hallway outside the apartment, and even before I look through the peephole in the door, I know it's him. I see him searching for his keys in his pockets for a few seconds before finding them in the back pocket of his jeans, and I know I'm truly lost because I envy his hands for being able to touch him so easily, so

casually. My hands go to the doorknob before I can think.

He smiles again when he sees me. And that seals his fate.

“Hey neighbor, I haven’t seen you in the last few days.”

“Hi. Could I please use your bathroom? Mine has some plumbing issues.”

“Sure, no problem.” He says and gives me that smile that doomed us both.

I only have enough self-control to wait until he closes the door.

Then I’m on top of him, my teeth ripping his throat and arterial blood exploding around me, filling me, making me complete.

He tries to scream and push me away, but the strength I exert is too strong for any sound to escape, and soon he loses consciousness, and I continue drinking and drinking. My hunger being satisfied and transforming me into something new.

Mom always said that I would know from the moment I met him, the first man I would kill. As it happened to her, and to my sisters, and to all of our ancestors who still walk among us.

Some of those like us are made, in our family; however, we have the privilege of being a dynasty; we were born and raised in the light, but we come from shadows and to shadows we always return.

When I feel full I continue to lie beside him, he is still kind of warm even though his heart has already stopped beating. I feel a pang of guilt, but not as much as I spent my whole life imagining I would feel in this moment.

And greater than the guilt, I feel grateful to him, for being my first, for making it easy for me. There will be others, but I doubt their blood will taste as sweet as his.

When the sun goes down, I will call my mother and she will come with my sisters to help me clean up the mess. They will hug me and finally I will be one of them completely .

I notice in the corner that some of the moving boxes are still sealed.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” I say, and touch him behind his ear.

His skin is starting to get cold, but his blood, which is still flowing inside me, keeps me warm for both of us.

The Returned Child

For a long time the Changeling observed the sleeping girl in the bed before saying:

“She is prettier than me.”

And that was true.

In terms of facial features and body shape the two were the same, but the brown tone of her skin seemed more luminous than the Changeling’s, her eyelashes longer, the curls of her hair more lustrous. A girl who grew up in a fairy tale.

“And so?” the fairy sitting on the floor said.

“And so people will notice, a person doesn’t become prettier overnight out of nowhere.”

The Fairy really hated recovery missions.

Alina, the Changeling of that night, wasn’t crying and saying it was all a big mistake, yet she was still there, hours after the revelation, after being given proof upon proof of the reality of the situation.

She only cried a little as she said goodbye to her mother and younger brother, who had been put to sleep by the fairy almost an hour before, with the memories of their farewell buried deep within their minds, to be remembered only in dreams and forgotten the moment they woke up.

However, she found herself quiet in her words and restless in her movements, and she was still there in the room where she had grown up, looking at the girl in bed. It was not good to rush them too much. Usually the ones who tried to escape were the ones who did not have enough time to say goodbye and walk on their own into their new lives, and tracking operations were much worse than recovery missions.

“Any difference they notice will only be subtle, our Queen made you to look exactly like the stolen child. And she already has a copy of your memories, the ones from our world will seem like just a dream, so there will be no problem. She will wake up, she will go to school, she will live your life from now on as if she had lived it all along.”

“If you were going to leave her where she was to begin with, what was the point of taking her in the

first place? Was there something wrong with her that made you not want her anymore?"

"Nothing wrong, apparently she was a lovely girl. There were tears when it was announced that it was time for her to be returned, and the tears weren't just hers."

"Then why?"

"She's not the point, you are. We always send our babies to grow up among humans, so they feel grateful for the advantages we have. I went through that, as did all of those you'll be living with from now on."

"I don't feel that grateful, to tell you the truth."

"You'll feel it when wings sprout from your back and you feel the magic flowing through your fingers. You'll feel it when you fly."

That made the expression on Alina's face change. It was something she longed for, the fairy could see, as if it were an intrinsic part of her very nature. What was once unique to fairy-tales was now an attainable prospect.

The fairy world wasn't her home and probably wouldn't be for a long time, and yet it was a chance to finally be the person she wanted and was born to be.

"Can I have her memories, so I can at least know what I'm getting myself into?"

"Our minds can't be changed as easily as theirs, it's one of our greatest advantages."

"Will I be able to come back?"

"Eventually you'll see this world again, you might even come to see her and her family, but no, my dear. You'll never return."

"Have you seen yours?"

"My what?"

"You said it happens to everyone, that we're all sent to grow up among humans. There must have been a girl put in your place, another child stolen and returned. It's her I want to know about."

“Yes, I saw her a few times. She lived, she died. She was happy, as much as anyone can be in this troubled world at least.”

There was more, of course, there is always more, but the Changeling didn't need to know that.

"Can I be left alone for a moment, to say goodbye?"

"You already did, her mother and brother are already asleep."

"I want to say goodbye to her." Alina said, pointing to the girl in the bed.

The fairy rolled her eyes, but said, "As you wish." And the fairy went into the hallway.

Alina kept looking at the girl on the bed, their features were indeed the same, from the curve of their lips to the shape of their eyebrows. Her mother had accused Alina of being a narcissist a few times, and there was a reason for that, but she had never thought she was as beautiful as the girl on the bed. Maybe it was the result of her growing up in the fairy world, something in the water or the air.

Or maybe it was something fundamentally human that the returned child had that Alina simply lacked.

She lay down next to her, just looking at her in silence before saying:

“Hi, Alina... I’ve never met anyone who had the same name as me. I’ve been in classes with lots of Alices, Alissas and even an Aline once, but never another Alina. Although I think that’s really your name and not mine... I’m sorry for all the stupid things I’ve done that you’re going to have to deal with. Take care of Mom and Lara and Hugo. I don’t know who you left behind, but I’ll try to find them and do my best for them. I don’t think either of us would have chosen this, but we’ll have to learn to make the best of it. I hope you sleep well and dream of whatever you want most in this world,” the Changeling said, and kissed the girl on the bed, giving her back her name and performing her first magic with just a touch.

And for the rest of the night the girl on the bed dreamed about what it would be like to have wings.

And she would dream about this from time and time again for the rest of her life.

In The Shadows

You wake from a dream shortly before arriving at the kingdom's capital. You have already forgotten what the dream was about. The only thing you are certain of is that your brother was there, as he has been in all your worst dreams in the decades that followed the war. From the carriage window you see the castle in the distance. It is a night without the glow of the moon or the stars to help light the way, but you would recognize those shadows anywhere. You are home.

The horses gallop fast along the road to the capital, making the interior of the carriage shake. Your ladies-in-waiting who insisted on coming on the journey are uncomfortable. In another circumstance, this would make you tell the driver to slow down a little and he would obey without hesitation. After all, soon your word will be law. But you don't.

You arrive at the castle shortly before dawn.

"Is he still...?" You start to ask the servant who came to open the carriage door, but stop halfway,

not really knowing what to ask: *Dead? Awake?
Lucid? Here?*

“The King is in the royal chambers, Milady.”

You arrive at the royal chambers. Only the royal physician, the priest, and the King - your father - are present. You don't ask any questions; everything that needs to be said is in the note delivered by the messenger who came to your residence. *The King drank a belladonna potion and he will probably die before sunrise, come quickly.*

All you say is: “Thank you for your service. Please leave me alone with my father.”

They leave, and only then do you go to the side of the bed. You touch his fingers with the tips of yours and he wakes up.

“Is he still here?”

“Who, the priest?”

“No. My boy, my shining boy.”

His eyes are dilated and his breathing labored but he still smiles as he says it.

“Only your girl here, I’m afraid.”

“Liar, I can see him, my boy is behind you.”

You stopped believing in ghosts a long time ago, but still you look back and see nothing. Probably a hallucination born of the poison running through his blood.

“Isn’t he beautiful?”

In your mind you conjure the image of your brother. He was beautiful, but he was also cruel. Your memories of your older brother painted in your mind the image of a stubborn and braggart boy, given to tantrums when he didn’t get his way, and with a taste for nastiness in his amusements. Maybe time would have changed him, maybe the war that killed him would have given him wisdom, patience and compassion if he had lived. Maybe that’s what your father sees in the shadows, or maybe he really saw his son just as he had been with all his flaws. Love is not a meritocracy after all.

“Yes, father, he is.”

“Why doesn’t he say anything?”

“Maybe he doesn’t know what to say... was it an accident?”

“No, it was a bastard from Calabria. I never learned the man’s name. I almost didn’t sign the stupid ceasefire because of it but the council insisted, and I was so tired.”

“I’m talking about the potion, the one you drank. Was it an accident?”

“No.”

“Why would you do that?”

He hesitated for a second, before saying:

“Because I’m tired and because you’re ready. Because he died and the kingdom lived and I only have enough love in me for one of them, and it’s not the one that needs me now.”

And for me? You think but don’t say. A good daughter to the end.

You cry softly and he holds your hand until you stop, but his gaze keeps drifting behind you.

Whatever he sees in the shadows there must be beautiful because he passes away with a smile on his face.

Pas de Deux

In between dance steps, I search the audience until I find her face. She often doesn't make it easy for me, sometimes she's in the center or in the front row, but more often she's in the back and in the corners, hidden in the shadows.

I'm not sure what I would do if I didn't find her, or what I would feel.

Relief? Sadness? Fear? Loneliness? Joy? Longing?

All of these possibilities seem equally likely, even though I know they shouldn't be. And I won't find out today because soon enough I see her face.

She's in the audience. She always is, no matter what city the ballet company is performing in that night. Or what country. Or what continent.

She smiles at me when our eyes meet, I don't react, after all it's not what the scene on stage requires and I'm the best at what I do; she made me this way. These are the exact terms of the deal made many years ago on a cold night where the blue moon shone in the sky: in exchange for my soul I

would be the best in the world. This deal was signed in blood and sealed with a kiss.

A few times, after a performance, I followed her, and one of those times, I asked her why she always showed up. If her presence was required for it to work, or if that was her way of torturing me before my time. In response she said:

“I’m just a fan, my darling.”

The words keep replaying in my mind, sometimes they seem full of mockery, other times just like a simple truth. Sometimes when I risk looking at her again, in her face I see enchantment for the scene presented, the way in which, with movement and music we tell stories of loves gained and lost, of noble heroines dead before their time. I dance trying to guess how much of my jumps and twirls come from her and how much comes from me, from this body that I couldn't make move in reality the way it moved in my mind before, no matter the years of training and effort.

On nights when I can't sleep, I visualize what existence will be like when the time comes to pay the price. I imagine flames and freezing cold against

my skin, I imagine having my legs cut off, I imagine myself paralyzed and without a voice forever.

But what I imagine most often is that one day in hell, I will dance for her and only her.

Sometimes it feels like I already do.

Better than Reality

That was turning out to be a great first date. Davina had a fair number of first dates since she and Marcos had broken up more than a year ago, but this was the first one that made her think that maybe there could be a second date in the near future. Lucas was handsome and he was charming, and it was nice to talk to him; they liked the same books, but not for the same reasons, which made talking to him about this subject particularly interesting. She always liked the idea of having a boyfriend with whom she could talk about literature, so far she hadn't had much luck in that regard.

They went bowling and then had ice cream, walking hand in hand as the night fell. And now they were almost in front of her building, and she was almost certain that he would kiss her goodnight on the lips before leaving, and depending on how the kiss made her feel she was even considering inviting him to go upstairs with her. Lucas had been quiet for a few minutes now, she thought probably in anticipation of the moment when he arrived when he said:

"I have something to confess."

“Don’t you think confessions are a bit much for a first date?” Davina said, trying to sound casual but slightly worried.

“Well, I like to get things straight.”

“Right.”

“I saw you before I met you at the veterinary clinic.”

No. No. Please don’t.

“Where exactly?” Davina asked, wanting very much to be wrong.

“In a simulation.”

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A little over ten years earlier, she had seen a flier on the university bulletin board saying that they needed volunteers for a study in the software engineering course. And that the selected volunteers would be paid handsomely.

She went with Alice, who was studying veterinary medicine with her, and like her was always in need of money. When they went to the indicated location, they had their photos taken and were told that the project in question was related to biometrics, that if they were selected, a full body scan would be performed and that at the end they would receive a thousand bucks for their contribution, way more than the other studies she had participated in had paid for them, even the ones in the biomedical department that had left her with spots on her skin for weeks.

A week later they called to say that they had been selected and that they would be required to come to the lab.

The process took no more than a couple of hours, and half of it was spent signing documents, and the other half divided between the body scanner and reading a series of syllables written on a piece of paper that one of the assistants had given her. And she left the lab feeling that she had earned money for doing basically nothing.

A year later BtR (Better than Reality) was launched, a company that revolutionized virtual reality, giving

its players not only experiences in vision and hearing, but also touch, smell and taste.

The technology was launched and used mainly in three ways: games, chat rooms and pornography.

And there in the catalog of 80 available bodies was her body, as well as Alice's. For anyone with a subscription to use it in any way they wished for the modest fee of R\$19.90 per month with the first month free to try. A bargain indeed.

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"I didn't mean to embarrass you," Lucas said, pulling her out of her thoughts, out of her silence.

It had been a long time since she had been automatically recognized, now the catalog had thousands of people. And she was no longer the 19-year-old girl shown in those pictures. And yet he knew. He recognized her.

"So why did you mention it?" she asked.

"Just to say that I know, and that I don't care."

That was probably the best she could hope for, and she knew it. Marcos had left her when he found out. But at the same time, something in Lucas's tone irritated her, as if he was expecting a congratulations or a thank you from her for being so understanding, a reward for simply being such a nice guy. That he in his magnanimous generosity had decided to give her the honor of being forgiven for her past.

It didn't feel fair that this was the best she could hope for.

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The month that followed the launch of BtR was the worst of her life.

Her name didn't appear in the catalog but anyone who knew her could see it was her. Her parents soon found out, she could still hear her mother crying and her father yelling at her for being so stupid.

And strangers on the street would look at her in recognition and then smile maliciously. And some of the biggest jerks in class would talk openly about how they had fucked her before she came to class, about all the fetishes they had made her do.

This would continue until she graduated, but that first month was the worst because that's when Alice killed herself.

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They walked in silence, her hand no longer holding his. And she was looking straight ahead instead of at him.

"I think I made a mistake, I know a lot of girls don't like it when guys use BtR, I had an ex who said it was the same as cheating, but I thought-" Lucas started to say.

"I don't have a problem with you using BtR, the technology itself isn't bad. I don't even care that you use it for sex."

"Then why are you like this?"

"I care because it's me, my face, my body, my voice. You know that the first few of us didn't know that our images would be used like that, right? Most people do, we tried to sue many times and we were crushed by their legal department every time. And any scandal involving the original models only makes the downloads go up."

She thought of Alice, who she had been thinking about during that whole conversation, her suicide had been a scandal at the time and had also made her the most accessed item in the catalog that year, everyone wanting to fuck the dead girl.

"I'm sorry." he said, and he seemed honest.

"It's fine." she said, and that wasn't true.

He wasn't a bad man, and his intentions had probably been good, she could still see some kind of future with him. And yet the night seemed ruined. In their first hours together she had managed to completely forget about those things, with her mind filled with beautiful illusions of perfect love, something a little better than reality, and that comment had dragged her back, the night even

seemed colder now and she wouldn't dare to approach him to warm up.

When they finally arrived in front of the building where she lived, he moved to kiss her, just as she expected, but she turned her face slightly away from him and he got the message.

And she left him at the entrance, and entered the elevator alone and unknissed.

Blessed

The prisoner had only been allowed to see a priest on the morning of her execution; apparently she had insisted that if she was denied she would kill herself on the spot and deny the kingdom the pleasure of seeing her publicly executed. Brother Josiah had not been in the priesthood long but he imagined this was a common occurrence, the proximity of the ax time made one wonder about the state of their immortal soul, and God knew the girl had things to confess. But the strange thing was that she had asked for him specifically, despite never having met him as far as he knew.

“You will have ten minutes to speak with her,” the guard who led him to the dungeons said.

All the cells were empty except for the one at the end of the dungeon corridor. She was sitting on the floor, her dress was dirty, her bare feet both in shackles.

During her trial she had been quiet and blank-faced from what he had heard. But she smiled when she saw him, which took him by surprise. It wasn't a smile of madness, or of malice. But rather the kind

of smile he would expect to find on the face of one of his parishioners at Sunday mass.

"Thank you for coming, your grace."

"It is my duty."

"I'm afraid I can't offer you a place to sit since they didn't give me any other than the floor."

"I'm fine standing."

She looked at him for a second as if she was sizing him up. And he was sizing her up too. He didn't have a fully formed image of what he expected to find in the dungeons, but it certainly wasn't her. She looked delicate, she didn't look like someone who could kill a prince and his entire royal guard in one night.

"Do you have anything to confess or atone for?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for the times I took the Lord's name in vain, for having had lustful thoughts about some of the boys in the village where we lived, for sometimes disobeying my parents, for sometimes being vain about my hair... it doesn't seem like much now, they cut it when they arrested me but

before that, the people of the village always said it was very beautiful."

He waited a few more seconds for her to continue, but she didn't say anything.

"Do you have anything else to apologize for?"

"No."

"And the prince you killed?"

She waited for a few seconds, her eyes focused on her dirty hands instead of him. Until her eyes lifted and looked directly into his.

"I did not kill a prince, I killed a monster; that was what he was to me when I took the knife, and that is what he still is to me. The lack of nobility in his actions speaks louder than the so-called nobility of his blood."

"And you think that was up to you and not God?"

"Kings do it all the time, just as the lords do to their servants, they did to me when they passed sentence to have my head cut off. And I have reason to

believe that I was acting in the name of heaven when I decided to take my knife and slit his throat."

The priest didn't know how to answer that, such a question had also been weighing on his mind since his time in the monastery. As surprising as the fact that this delicate creature had committed such a barbaric crime was her language. As far as he knew, she was just a peasant girl who had never learned to read or write, the eldest daughter of a family of five girls who worked on a small farm in a village a few hours away from the capital of the kingdom. It occurred to him that perhaps if he made her explain her actions, she would see the evil in them, perhaps he could make her repent and thus get a chance to save her immortal soul before it was too late.

"How did you do it?" he asked.

"What?"

"The prince, I saw him once when he visited the monastery, he was a big man. It doesn't seem to me that you alone could have killed him. People think you had help."

"I understand why they think that, in a fight he probably would have won easily. It wasn't a

warrior's death he had, he was drunk in one of the rooms above the tavern, he and his knights had gone there to celebrate after hurting my sister. There were five of them, one would probably have been enough, she was never particularly strong, but they took turns holding her legs and arms while they took their pleasure from her body. She came home bleeding and broken and there they were in the tavern laughing and drinking without a care in the world."

"How did you know which room was his and the knights'? There were twelve other people there that night but you only killed them."

"Would you believe me if I told you an angel told me?"

"Would you say something like that?"

"I am saying something like that. They told me where to find him, they told me which rooms he and his companions were in, and they left all the doors unlocked so I could go in and out of the rooms. And they made sure I was only caught after my duty was done."

“Are you sure it was angels who spoke to you that night?”

“Are you asking if I think they were demons? Or maybe if I’m just crazy?”

“I don’t know.”

She smiled. Which made him even more apprehensive.

“I don’t know either, I’ve never been sure of anything. Just that they’ve spoken to me since I was a child and what they say has always proven true.”

“Was this the first time these angels made you kill someone?”

“They didn’t make me kill anyone, they presented me with a choice. They also told me what I could gain if I did nothing, that I would have lived, in fear and anger but lived, and that I would have met you and for me you would have left your church behind and we would have been very happy until the end of our days.”

It took a few seconds for Josiah to recover from the statement, he was almost certain that the girl was

crazy, and also that she completely believed what she was saying.

“Then why did you do it? If your, *our*, future would have been so good?”

“Because they also showed me that he would continue to do what he did to my sister, over and over again. That one day he would have the crown and that he would not treat this land with any more respect than he had treated her. But I think it was more something my mother said to me when she was taking care of my sister and I talked about going to tell the baron who owned the land to arrest him or gather some of the local boys to beat them up, she said there was nothing we could do, simply because being who he was it meant he was above consequences. And I realized that was not true. I could do something and I did. Free will also means freedom to accept the consequences of your actions. I accept the consequences of mine, just as what I did was a consequence of their actions.”

“But aren’t you sorry?”

“Not for them. But I am sorry for you, it was selfish of me to ask you to come here, but I really just wanted to meet you once.”

“I forgive you.”

“Thank you, the angels told me you would be kind. I think I would have loved you quite a lot in that other life.”

She took his hand and kissed the tips of his fingers.

“Do they still talk to you?”

“Yes, they never stop. When I was younger it used to really annoy me, but now it’s nice, it’s too quiet and lonely down here, we were a family of seven, silence was never a part of my life. And they told me our time together is ending.”

And just after she finished speaking he heard the footsteps of the guard coming to get him.

“Bless me one last time before you leave.”

“Of course.”

She knelt down and he placed his hand on her forehead and said words he knew by heart, thinking all the while of how warm her skin felt despite the

cold of the dungeon and how soon it would permanently be not so.

“It’s time,” the guard said after he finished his prayer.

“Goodbye, thank you for coming.” she said.

“Goodbye. And bless you.”

He went up the stairs with no idea what he would do when he reached the top, whether he would stay for the execution to see her one last time or if he would leave so that the last image he would have of her would be the one of her serene smile in the cell hearing angels speaking to her.

The Mermaid's Song

Clarissa had planned to keep the body in the raft with her, and she kept it there for as long as she could, even when it started to stink after hours in the sun. The sun wasn't beating down now, but the waters were getting rough and she would have a better chance of stability without the extra weight.

For many years she had doubted that anyone would hear her prayers, but she said one anyway in his name since the man had mentioned God before he died, that he had a plan and that he was watching over them, that soon the rescue helicopters would come to save them. After hearing this, Clarissa thought that if the helicopters came it would be because the plane had a black box and not exactly because of divine intervention.

In the end, she with her trust in technology and he with his trust in the metaphysical were both wrong, because the helicopters did not come and the man died a few hours later.

His name was Marco, he was forty-eight years old, exactly twice her age, he had been married for twenty-six years to a woman named Valeria. He had two daughters and a son, and he was on the plane

because his eldest daughter was getting married in another country, and he wanted to be present at the ceremony. It had only been a little over seventy-two hours since Clarissa had met him, and for most of those seventy-two hours he had already been dead, but even so some tears came to her eyes as she threw him overboard. He deserved a better burial than the bottom of the ocean, probably everyone else on the plane deserved it. She deserved it, too.

When the waters calmed down, she lay down in the raft and looked up at the sky. It was a warm summer night, with the sky full of stars and the sea seemingly endless wherever she looked; Clarissa would probably judge this view as beautiful if she didn't feel so miserable at that moment. She felt the urge to urinate, so she collected the liquid that came out of her with her hands and then brought it to her lips. The first time she did this, Clarissa felt completely disgusted by that action, but the seawater would dehydrate her and make her chance of survival smaller. But this was the third time and she only felt relief from having something in her dry throat.

“That’s disgusting.” the mermaid commented casually.

“Go to hell.” Clarissa said.

“I don’t know what that place is, and even if I did, why would I go there?”

“Of course you know. You’re a creation of my mind, a hallucination, everything I know you know too.”

“That’s not the case, I thought I mentioned that earlier.”

The mermaid had indeed mentioned it and there was a part of Clarissa that wanted to believe it was true, but it wasn’t. She was certain of it.

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Clarissa met the mermaid on the morning of the third day after the plane went down, listening to her song.

She opened her eyes and saw a beautiful young woman with her head resting next to hers, golden eyes and hair, sun kissed skin and that voice that seemed to envelop her completely. *A dream*, Clarissa concluded and didn't mind, it was a good one; certainly a much better one than the one she was having before - with the plane crashing and all

those people screaming. She wished she could stay listening to that song forever, but at the same time she wished to cover the lips from which that beautiful voice came with hers. Little by little the second wish became stronger, and she did it. The mermaid's lips had a salty taste, a soft texture, and for those seconds, they were all she wanted in the world.

When Clarissa pulled away the mermaid was no longer singing, but smiling at her. In normal circumstances, Clarissa's automatic reaction to seeing a beautiful girl smiling at her would be to smile back, but without the music she could finally notice the dead body on the other side of the raft; She screamed when she suddenly came across that sight, and the young woman who had woken her up with her song was startled by this change in behavior and swam away.

Seeing the scene, Clarissa stopped screaming; her mouth was still open, but no sound came out of it, and at that moment she realized that there was a long golden tail where the other girl's legs should have been.

The mermaid returned to the boat during the evening. In the period between these two first

encounters, Clarissa had enough time to form a theory about what was happening: like men who after a long time in the desert began to hallucinate about Oasis, she - because of hunger, thirst and trauma in general - had created a Mermaid. After reaching this conclusion, Clarissa felt a little grateful; her brain could have given her an illusion of a normal girl, perhaps another survivor of the crash, but no; the chosen one was a being that Clarissa knew was impossible. This was good, her mind could show her hallucinations, but it made them identifiable by presenting them as things that Clarissa rationally knew were impossible.

“Hello,” the mermaid said shyly.

Clarissa didn't respond.

“Hello.” she repeated.

Clarissa didn't answer again.

“I know you're not asleep. Your eyes are open and people like you don't sleep with their eyes open.”

Clarissa remained silent.

“That's boring!”

“Then go away.” Clarissa finally said.

“Oh, so you do know how to talk! I thought for a second that they had cut out your tongue, but then I remembered feeling it earlier. Why didn’t you answer me sooner?”

“I’m not going to waste my energy talking to a hallucination.”

“I’m not a hallucination.”

“Whatever.” Clarissa said and closed her eyes.

Her blood pressure was low so she fell asleep easily, fully aware that she might not wake up again. It wasn’t a good prospect, but she was so tired she couldn’t help it.

Later, Clarissa woke up again to the mermaid's voice, but this time she was just talking and shaking her shoulder hard.

“WAKE UP! You need to wake up!”

“WHAT?!”

“It's coming.”

“The helicopters?”

“No, the waves; big ones, you have to throw off the dead weight so they don't sink you.”

It took a few seconds for Clarissa to realize that the mermaid was referring to the man with her in the raft.

“He's not dead weight, his name is Marco and he's a person.”

“He was a person, and if you have any desire to continue being one, you should get rid of him.”

Clarissa hated the idea of the mermaid. Clarissa also hated the fact that the argument she presented made sense.

“Again with the silence? Well, do what you want, after the big waves pass I'll come back to see if you're still a person. I hope that's the case, but I don't think I'll be too sad if you aren't.”

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The mermaid was circling the raft like sharks did with boats in movies Clarissa had seen. It was more aesthetically pleasing than a shark's fin, but it couldn't help but have a threatening tone. Clarissa moved closer to the middle of the raft, staying away from the edges.

The feeling of threat only passed when she began to sing again. Clarissa pressed her nails hard against the palms of her hands, so she would have something to focus on besides the song. It was enough to keep her from going towards the mermaid like she had before, but even so the feeling of that voice enveloped her, it felt good. It almost made her feel grateful that her subconscious had decided to give her something beautiful to distract her from the terror that awaited her, and that was the problem; happiness can be addictive and she had to be aware of it, she couldn't lose herself in that delirium. She then closed her eyes and dug her nails even harder into her palms, until blood came out.

After the song ended Clarissa opened her eyes and saw that the mermaid's eyes were focused on her hands.

"That wasn't smart, you know, some of the inhabitants of these waters can smell blood and they might come after you."

Clarissa had once read that shark attacks on humans were much rarer than the movies led people to believe, only about seven or five a year, but given her luck lately it wouldn't surprise her if she ended up being one of those cases. Those were her options: death by dehydration or becoming shark food. *Maybe I should make a list of pros and cons*, she thought and smiled bitterly.

But there was a chance that someone would show up, a helicopter in the sky or a rescue boat on the horizon. Clarissa refused to consider being eaten by a shark so her most likely death was dehydration; a slow death perhaps, but it was the option that would give her the most time to be rescued. Every second you were still breathing was a second that could change everything.

"Why don't you like my song?" the mermaid asked.

"I like it, that's the problem."

"How can liking something be a problem?"

“I know the mythology, I know about how pirates would jump overboard and drown themselves to hear the mermaids sing. I don’t want to be like them.”

“That’s not entirely true. Mothers and older sisters tell how in the old days they would take many of the land dwellers to our kingdom, how when they gave themselves completely so they could swim through our waters without drowning.”

“So all the pirates are living happily ever after in your watery kingdom, how cute.”

“No, they did drown, but only after my sisters got tired of them.”

“So if you sang and I went with you, how long do you think it would take until I bored you?”

“I don’t think you’d bore me, but even if you did I wouldn’t get rid of you, I promise I wouldn’t. And our promises aren’t like your people’s, they can’t be broken in any way, it would be until the end of my life. And I’m young, I’ll still live for a long time.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’m not going with you, I’m waiting for rescue. And I don’t want you to sing to me.”

“Okay, then I promise I won’t sing again, at least not until you ask me to.”

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Clarissa woke up with the sunlight in her eyes. She took off her blouse and used it to cover her head before going to sleep, hoping that wouldn’t happen, but she must have moved during her sleep and dislodged it. She put the blouse back on over her head and shoulders, forming a sort of makeshift hood to protect her from the sun’s rays. Her skin wasn’t naturally very pale, but the sun could still do damage. The day before, she had already been a little burned on the parts of her body that were exposed.

In the last few days, it hadn’t been uncommon to see some of the plane wreckage appearing around her. There was one relatively close that morning. She used her hands as an oar to reach it.

As she suspected, there were some wires and other thin, bendable metals in the middle. Clarissa

selected the ones she thought were usable and began to join them together, twisting the ends together to form something resembling a harpoon, and used the sharpest one to make the hook on the end.

It took half an hour with the generic harpoon in the water before any fish appeared, and another two hours before she managed to catch one. In those two hours he had screamed in frustration about three times and almost thrown the harpoon into the ocean in a fit of rage, but now there was a fish in her hands. She was hungry, but she still waited until it had finished struggling and was completely dead before taking the hook and opening up the rest of the fish's belly, throwing out the spine, and devouring the meat.

It was nothing like the sushi she and her mother sometimes ate when they went to Japanese restaurants for lunch or dinner; she used to say it was a way to have a good meal while also exploring their cultural past. Clarissa thought several times about pointing out to her mother that the second part didn't make sense since her grandparents weren't Japanese, but Chinese, but she never did - she really loved those lunches and dinners. It brought her some comfort to know that her mother

would definitely think she was still alive; she had a habit of keeping hope no matter the chances were and would only believe after seeing her dead body in front of her. Maybe, this time, that hope wouldn't be in vain.

In her current meal there was no seasoning or sauces to give it a special flavor, just that white meat. Rationally Clarissa knew that the taste was much inferior, but she felt that that fish was better than any sushi she had ever eaten, better than anything that had ever been in her mouth, to tell the truth.

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The mermaid returned at dusk and asked:

“So, what's your name?”

“Clarissa.”

“Don't you want to know my name?”

“I assume it's something like Ariel.”

“Well, it starts similar, but ends differently. My name is Alana.”

“Arielana?”

“No, just Alana.”

“Nice to meet you, Alana.”

“Really?”

“No, it’s just an expression.”

“You know, the other people from the land that I’ve met have been much more polite than you.”

“I’m sorry that politeness isn’t one of my priorities while I’m fearing my imminent death.”

“I accept your apology.”

Clarissa was going to explain that she was being sarcastic, but the mermaid’s expression seemed so innocent and sweet that being rude to her at that moment seemed akin to kicking a puppy, and it occurred to her that maybe she was being too harsh. After all, Alana had told her to throw the other body away inside the raft, which had actually increased her chances of survival, or of doing something worse if her hunger got too bad, and she had, for

now, kept her promise not to sing anymore. And contrary to what Clarissa had predicted, speaking did not make her feel more tired, but rather more alive. Maybe the mermaid was not a trap, maybe she was a gift from her mind, a stimulus for her to keep breathing, second by second until the helicopters appeared. Clarissa could never love something that was proof that she was losing her sanity, but hating seemed increasingly unfair, and after all, how many people in the world have had the chance to talk to a manifestation of their subconscious?

“What did you do in the place where you came from?” the mermaid asked.

“I went to places and saw if everything was in accordance with the law and if it wasn’t, I sent a report to the person in charge of the place saying what needed to be fixed. It was a kind of boring job, but it made people safer and it paid well and left me with several days free every week.”

“Was it because of your work that you got into the metal box?”

“No, it was because I wanted to, because I wanted to see the world. Although if it weren't for my job I

could never have afforded it. Maybe I should have skipped the course and gotten a job as a waitress.”

“What's a waitress?”

“Someone who serves food to others, the pay is generally pretty bad and doesn't bring much status to those who have this profession.”

“It seems like an important occupation, among my people those who bring food to others are celebrated.”

“Well, then I would like to be a mermaid too.”

The mermaid's smile disappeared and she looked at Clarissa as if she was evaluating her, and before Clarissa could ask her why she had such a strange face, the mermaid dove to the bottom of the sea. Clarissa waited for the mermaid to return that night, but that didn't happen.

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Clarissa was feeling hopeful on the fifth day, waking up to a light rain on top of her. It only lasted five minutes, but it was enough for her to be able to drink a little.

Everything that hurt the day before still hurt, but the rain seemed to have given her some of her energy back, she managed to catch two fish in the morning and slept in the afternoon with her blouse covering her face. She woke up shortly before the sun set and the mermaid returned. The waters were calm and the sky had a kind of orange hue.

“Are there any islands around here?” Clarissa asked as soon as she noticed Alana’s presence.

“No, our mothers chose this place for us to live precisely because it was far from everything.”

“Mothers?”

“Yes, it was them I went to talk to last night. They said I should take you to them, but I told them about my promise not to sing to you.”

“And what did they say about that?”

“That it was stupid of me, that I should have been more careful with my words.”

“Are any of these mothers your real mother?”

“I don’t know, probably yes, I never thought to ask. Do you have a mother too?”

“Yes, and commenting that I should have been more careful would be exactly the kind of thing she would say.”

“Would your father say that too?”

“No... actually, I don’t really know. He didn't live with us, they weren't divorced or anything like that, but he had to stay in this place and we only went to see him sometimes. My mother always thought he would get better one day and come back to live with us, but that never happened.”

“I'm so sorry.”

“You don't have to say that, it doesn't matter anymore.”

“I'm really sorry anyway.”

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The hope was gone as quickly as it came. On the sixth day Clarissa woke up with her throat hurting and cursing herself for having spent the whole night

wasting her energy talking to a hallucination, but Alana seemed so curious and excited to know about the things of the world. Clarissa talked about how a person could talk to another person who was on the other side of the world with technologies that were relatively easy for most people to access, how there were more treatments for diseases every day, how they had already put a man on the moon and that in a few years they would probably put a bunch on Mars, that there would be a colony there, that one day the Earth could be destroyed, but that humanity would continue. One night and a pleasant conversation, but even so she regretted it.

The sun was scorching. It took hours for her to catch a fish, and it didn't stay in her stomach for long, because the waters started to get rough and she felt nauseous, and ended up vomiting.

The mermaid didn't show up that day, or that night. Which was a shame really, the nights were easier to bear than the days, but in them she had time to think, time to get bored or worse: disillusioned. If the mermaid had been there, she might have asked her to sing. The singing was an illusion, but it was so beautiful and sweet, and she needed more and more reminders that things like that could exist.

Before she fell asleep, it occurred to her that there was a possibility that she was already dead.

Maybe this was hell. She always thought that if there was some kind of afterlife, she would end up in limbo, the place of the virtuous pagans. She had done a lot of volunteer work since she was a teenager. Granted, she had only started because she wanted to spend more time with this girl she was into at the time. But she had continued long after her interest in the girl had faded. She was proud of that, of giving something to the world instead of just taking, but maybe that hadn't been enough.

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The mermaid woke her up just before dawn.
Clarissa rubbed her eyes and said:

"Hi."

"Hello. I'm sorry I didn't show up sooner, the current took you further than I had anticipated and on top of that I ended up looking for you on the wrong side."

"It's okay."

“I missed you today.”

“I missed you too.”

The mermaid looked kind of sad, she took a deep breath and said:

“I lied the other day.”

“I know.”

“Not about what you think. I'm not an illusion. I lied when I said I wouldn't be too sad if you weren't a person anymore when I found you again.”

“Thank you, that's sweet.”

“I think if things continue this way, you'll stop being a person soon.”

“I know.”

“I talked to the mothers and they told me there was a way to stop that from happening, you wouldn't be a person the way you are now. You'd be transformed into a person like me.”

“Are you going to take me to see Ursula, the Sea Witch to give me a shiny tail like yours in place of my weak legs?”

“I don’t know this Ursula you’re talking about, but I have a potion here that would do that,” Alana said, sinking her hands and pulling out a large glass bottle that was full to the brim from her hair.

Alana handed the bottle to Clarissa who opened the lid and put a few drops of the liquid that was inside on her tongue and immediately spat the liquid back out. The taste was more than salty, it was pure salt in liquid form, even if she was in good shape drinking something like that would make her sick, now it would only make her die faster. And it might not be a priority at the moment, but she really wanted to know how someone could keep a bottle in their hair.

“I know it doesn’t taste good, but you need to drink it.”

“I don’t need to do anything, go away and take this bottle with you.”

“But you said you missed me today.”

“When I said that I thought maybe you were a gift from my mind, but you’re not, not completely at least. You are the manifestation of what my mind needs or wants at the moment. You are Death now, and I won’t do that, I can’t do that.”

The mermaid pulled Clarissa’s hand against her face and placed it under hers. There was a part of Clarissa that expected her hand to pass right over her face, for the image to distort like an image from a projector, but no: it was there, as solid as she herself. *‘What if it’s not a lie? What if this isn’t all just a hallucination? What if she really is what she says she is? She exists and if I drink that potion I can continue to exist too.’* Clarissa thought for a second, but then the thought that came to her was *‘It must have been like that for him too.’* The condition her father had usually manifested itself in late adolescence or early adulthood; she was twenty-four, a little above average, but not far enough away. Maybe the hallucination was being caused not by dehydration, not by trauma, but by something that had been inside her all along, waiting to come out.

“Why are you crying?” the mermaid asked.

Clarissa didn't even notice that tears had started to fall from her eyes, but when she brought her fingers to her cheeks, she felt them there.

"I think I'm going crazy, and it scares me."

"Does it scare you more than death?"

Clarissa kept thinking about her father, about the monthly visits to the hospital, about the bars they put between him and her to make sure that if he lost control he couldn't hurt her.

"No." Clarissa said, not sure if that was true.

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Alana didn't leave this time. Clarissa spent the day drifting in and out of consciousness, but every time her eyes opened the mermaid was there, gently stroking her hair and begging her to drink the contents of the bottle, and being refused again and again.

It was already night when Clarissa woke up for the last time, but this time Alana wasn't there looking at her, something she was grateful for because the first thing she did was vomit, and in that vomit

there was no sign of partially digested food or bile, just blood. She looked in horror at the part that was still floating in the water. Blood, her blood, the sign that her body was failing her once and for all. She struggled to sit up and looked around for the mermaid, but she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it was fair, she hadn't given in to the fantasy so the fantasy had given up on her. But it didn't feel fair, she couldn't do that, she had to have every second, her mother would still think she was alive the same way she thought her father would someday get better, and it wasn't fair for her to have another vain hope. Maybe Clarissa really didn't deserve the mermaid, but she didn't deserve to be alone at that moment. Marco hadn't been alone. She had held his hand until he stopped breathing, and Marco had had twice as much time as she had in her entire life. It wasn't fair that it had happened to him, but it was even less fair that it had happened to her.

Then Clarissa screamed the mermaid's name as loud as she could, which wasn't that loud. Her voice came out weak and each word hurt, it seemed to cut the inside of her throat, but she kept screaming until she saw the mermaid appear in the distance, swimming towards her. Then she lay down again.

"Clarissa, I'm here. I have the potion here with me. Do you want me to pour it on your lips?"

Clarissa smiled and said.

"No, but I would really like you to sing again."

Alana looked at her sadly, but nodded and leaned in to kiss Clarissa's forehead.

Clarissa closed her eyes and listened to the mermaid's song.

Eliza & Bianca + The End of the World

I should have learned to drive when I had the chance.

My mother offered to teach me shortly after my eighteenth birthday, and I said no. Partly because of the environment (there were so many cars in the world already), partly for self-preservation reasons - I knew the statistics, that a car accident is much more likely to kill you than a plane crash or any other cause at my age, and despite the occasional teenage angst I had already decided that I wanted to live a long life. But mostly, I said no because I was still mad at her about the things that happened around the time of the divorce. And because I thought she would have more time to teach me that in the future.

I know what you're thinking, that I think this is because it would mean more time with her before she dies, I'm sorry to inform you that you're wrong. Don't get me wrong, I wish I had spent more time with my mom even if marital fidelity wasn't one of her main qualities, but I wish I had spent more time with everyone from my old life, and the whole not knowing how to drive thing is a huge inconvenience

now because it means relying on Bianca for things like that.

Bianca tried to teach me a few weeks ago shortly after we left the old neighborhood, but I was stressed and so was she and we ended up arguing in the middle of the lesson and every time after that when I brought up the subject of driving lessons she looked at me and said:

"What part of never again don't you understand?"

The part about being without transportation in case something bad happens to you Bianca, I thought but didn't say, in the last six months I've gotten familiar enough with her mindset to know that answer would only make her angry. Eventually she'll realize that on her own, and then insist that I learn, she's a lot nicer than she lets on.

Maybe she's afraid that one day after one of our fights I'll just take the car and leave her behind, and I don't deny that that's a possibility, but in this scenario I can't see myself not going back twenty minutes later to look for her.

Under normal circumstances in a world that made sense it seems very unlikely that Bianca and I would have become friends, but in this one she's all I have.

A little before dusk we stopped at a house that seemed to be in good condition and with no signs of vandalism. Of course the second part didn't last with us grabbing the trash can and banging on the lock until it broke and allowed us to enter. I went to the kitchen to check for non-perishables while Bianca checked the rooms for bodies.

"Everything's clean ma'am, you can choose your room without fear of your delicate eyesight being offended." Bianca said leaning on the kitchen doorway.

"Okay. Thanks."

"So, anything good here?"

"I found some canned peas that are still not past their expiration date."

"Ugh. You could have just said no."

"Fine. More for me."

She'll eat it eventually, we both know that, but that doesn't stop her from complaining every time, she hates canned food of almost any kind except for corn and sardines. About three days ago we happened to pass by a house with a tangerine tree, we picked all seventeen ripe fruits from the tree and they've served as our meals for the last few days, eight for me, nine for her, she offered to split the last one in half this morning but I told her I was already sick of tangerines. that wasn't true but I felt like giving her a treat hoping she would reconsider her early resignation as a driving instructor.

I served the peas on two plates and we ate dinner in the living room and Bianca fell asleep on the couch soon after. The night was warm so I decided to test the shower. I went into the bathroom, opened the shower curtain and then I screamed.

I'm embarrassed by this, by now I should have gotten used to it. The body was huddled in the corner of the shower. It was a man, his skin was ashen, cold and stiff like everyone else's, the horrified expression petrified on his face the moment he realized what was happening.

"What happened?" Bianca said, coming to meet me.

I showed her the body.

"You said you checked everything," I said.

"I forgot about the bathrooms, I'm sorry Liz."

"Whatever."

"I think there's another bathroom in the master bedroom, I don't think there's a body in there."

"I lost the will to shower. I'll do it tomorrow before we leave."

"Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not mad, go back to sleep."

"Yes, you are, I can see it on your face."

"Go back to sleep, Bianca, you need to be well rested to be able to drive tomorrow."

"I wasn't sleeping," she said as she got out of the bathroom.

I put on the clean clothes I had set aside for after my shower and put on some deodorant. When I

come out I see that she has set up a fort in the living room, with the couch cushions and sheets taken from the bedrooms. Her face peeks out of the fort and she smiles.

“What is this?” I ask.

“I just thought it would be fun, we haven’t had a sleepover in a long time.”

“Basically all we have are sleepovers.”

“Not like this, come look.”

I kneel down and enter the fort. I didn’t attend many sleepovers in my childhood and adolescence and none of the ones I did have involved building a fort. Inside there are blankets and cushions and a mattress that she dragged in from one of the bedrooms.

I sit with my legs crossed and she rests her chin on my shoulder.

“So what do you think?”

“Very impressive.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry I forgot to check the shower, I know how much you hate seeing bodies.”

“I already told you I forgive you.”

“Actually, you didn’t.”

“I thought I did.”

I lay down on the pillows and pulled up one of the blankets.

“You don’t have to sleep here with me if you don’t want to,” she said.

“I do, it looks cozy.”

It’s also a lot safer to be together. She’s the only living person I’ve found so far, but if she and I survived the plague somehow there was a good chance there were others out there, and there was no guarantee that if any of those people found us that anything good would come of it.

“So what do you want to do for our sleepover? I can tell you the plot of a movie I remember since watching one isn’t an option. We can play truth or

dare. Or we can talk about cute girls, or boys, I know for you both are options.”

“What cute girls? There’s only you and you’re not even that cute.”

“Liar. I’m adorable.”

And she is. I won’t tell her this, but by the look on her face I think she knows I think so too

“Would I be too annoying if I just wanted to sleep?”

“A little, but I don’t mind.”

She lies down next to me and pulls my arm so we’re spooning. This isn’t that unusual when we sleep side by side, but it usually happens when we’re both sleeping. We lie apart and in our sleep we move closer together, this is the first time she’s pulled me while we’re still awake.

“When you had sleepovers as a kid and teenager did you always go to bed early?” she asks.

“Yeah, that’s probably why I didn’t get invited to many.”

“I wish I had met you when you were younger,
before all this.”

“Even though I was annoying at sleepovers?”

“Yeah.”

She closes her eyes. And I love her, I've known that
for a long time, but only now I know that I would
even if she wasn't the only one left.

I'm sure if I asked her to teach me how to drive now
she'd say yes, but I decide not to. After all some
things are still more important than survival skills,
and falling asleep content and comfortable with the
person I love is one of them.

Game Over

The ghosts of the Ensanguined Queen and the Forgotten Lover watched, as one by one, the members of the captured monarchy were taken to the dais set up in the middle of the garden by the rebels who had invaded the palace, and one by one they were tried for crimes against the kingdom and its people.

And one by one they were found guilty and sentenced to death.

The Queen brought her hand to her face as the last two were brought to the dais—the two youngest princes, a boy of twelve and the other of seven.

As the crowd cheered for the appropriate punishment for the boys, there was a second of hesitation that had not been present on other occasions. And for a second, the Ensanguined Queen's unbeating heart was filled with hope, that perhaps this time would be different. But a voice in the crowd shouted death and soon more voices followed until it seemed as if there was no voice that was not shouting, and they were all shouting the same word.

The man appointed as judge for the trial slammed his gavel on the table, slowly quieting the crowd, and announced that the princes would be sentenced to death.

The Ensanguined Queen's knees buckled and she found herself on the floor.

The Forgotten Lover looked down at her, her face showing no emotion, except perhaps for slight disdain for the Queen's display of excessive emotionality.

"You shouldn't be so surprised, everyone else received the same sentence."

"I'm not surprised. I'm heartbroken, and how could I not be? They're my descendants, of course I'm going to be distraught over their misfortune."

"They're the descendants of the man who killed me, and I'm not particularly happy to see them die either."

"Or particularly sad."

"It happens to everyone, Your Majesty, you should be used to it by now."

The Ensanguined Queen hated how in her voice ‘*Your Majesty*’ sounded like a mockery. And it probably was. In life no one would have dared to speak to her like that, but in death everyone becomes equal.

“It’s not every day that your bloodline ends, that’s not something you can get used to.”

“Your bloodline will not end, Godfrey had at least ten bastards, I’m sure at least some of them formed bloodlines of their own.”

The Forgotten Lover herself had been the mother of one of those bastard children, a sweet girl with red hair like hers and the black eyes of the Ensanguined Queen. The Forgotten Lover never learned what happened to her, the girl was taken away shortly after her death and never walked or was mentioned in those halls again. She liked to imagine that she was sent somewhere in the countryside and that for the rest of her life all the ugliness that existed behind the elegant doors of the palace was not part of her life. But it was easy to imagine the opposite, and various other types of misfortunes being part of her brief existence. The world was never kind to sweet girls.

“You know what I meant.”

And she did, but her thoughts on the matter were quite different. She had not lied when she said she took no joy in the deaths of the princes or the others who had been brought to the dais throughout the day. But she also knew that if she were alive, she would be in the crowd clamoring for royal blood to be spilled, not with the pleasure some took, but as someone taking part in a necessary evil for the greater good. Monarchy was a game of chance. In the centuries since her death she had seen some good kings and queens, but for every good monarch there were at least three horrible ones, and often the good ones spent most of their time trying to right the wrongs of those who had preceded them.

At the thought, her fingertips automatically went to her neck where the marks of King Godfrey’s hands remained to this day.

She would not say this to the Queen, but she was glad the game was finally over.

Just a part of me

There's another girl who lives inside me.

I created her when I was about five. I never really gave her a name, she was just the other girl, the one I could tell my parents was truly responsible for the bad things I did, who never protested her innocence by denying my word. And when I got older, too old to have an imaginary friend, my parents sent me to a psychiatrist who explained to me that the other girl was just a part of me, and so she became. She came to live inside me, her once distinct face became my face, her mind hidden deep inside mine and ready to come out whenever I wanted.

It usually wasn't so bad when she took over. When life got a little too boring she would step in and I would go inside. She cleaned my room, sat in on my physics class, interacted with my annoying relatives at family gatherings, or listened to my friend Carla cry about how her boyfriend cheated on her (again). So happy, so grateful to be outside again. I recommend having a second person living inside you, it saved me from many tedious situations, she lived the boring part of life and for me there was only fun and excitement. And we could have lived in

this perfect harmony forever, but as often happens with female relationships, boys ruined the peace.

At sixteen I fell in love, and so did she. And if it had been with the same boy, life could have been so good. The target of my passion was Gabriel Andrade. He was a year older, at the top of his class, his father was a neurosurgeon and his mother the CEO of a cosmetics company; he had a beautiful smile and even more beautiful abs and was the captain on the school soccer team.

And there was Mario something-something, who went to our school only because his father was the geography teacher and whose mother worked in a store at the mall. I know you must be thinking that I'm the worst kind of elitist, and you wouldn't be completely in the wrong, but it wasn't just that he was poor that offended me, and that he was so normal, so basic. He was kind of cute, not handsome. Reasonably intelligent, not clever. He was mediocre, plain and simple, just another guy. And yet she was falling for him. At first I wasn't so appalled by it, I even found it a bit funny. I took advantage of the classes where I had control of my body to give him confusing signals and I enjoyed it as she begged me to stop.

That is until fate smiled on me, at my friend Carla's boyfriend's birthday party. My boy, my Gabriel, so superior, so perfect, was there. He introduced himself and I pretended I didn't know who he was, we talked, and before midnight we were kissing. Less than a week later we were walking down the school hallways. We looked so good together, Manuela and Gabriel. If our school had been one of those you see in American movies, we would have been the kind of people who would be elected Prom King and Queen. I adored him and for a year I was so very happy.

And while this was happening, she was falling in love too. It started slowly. One day, during a chemistry class, she was assigned as Mario's lab partner, and they started talking. And this went on for a while. In the classes she took my place, she always found a way to sit next to him and start talking. I didn't mind that much, although I told her he was pathetic, and he was. He didn't even seem to care that as soon as I took control, I started ignoring him. Sometimes he seemed hurt, but he never complained or stopped talking to me, or her. As far as he knew, we were the same person. Don't you think that if someone allows others to treat them like trash, it's a clear sign that they are trash?

The first time Carla told me that people were talking about me possibly having a crush on Mario I had to laugh because it was so ridiculous. No matter how the girl inside me acted people knew I was dating Gabriel, Gabriel Andrade, how could they possibly consider that in those circumstances. I would seriously look twice at this Mario guy? But Carla convinced me that this was really going on, so that night I had a serious talk with the girl inside me and told her that she had to stop interacting with him or I wouldn't allow her to go out anymore. She whined a lot, but in the end she agreed.

Carla's boyfriend's birthday party was almost there, a very special night for many reasons that had nothing to do with the birthday boy. It had been a year since my romance with Gabriel had started, and it was the night I was planning to lose my virginity. There were times throughout the year that it almost happened, but I always stopped Gabriel before it went too far, even though I often wanted to. But more than sex, I didn't want Gabriel thinking I was an easy slut like so many of the other girls at our school. Still that night it was going to happen, I even knew where it was going to happen, we were going to go to this motel that Carla and her boyfriend sometimes went to, just a few blocks away from the house where the party was going to

take place, one that according to her was properly clean and didn't ask for ID to get a room for a few hours. But before that we were going to go to the party, we were going to dance and I was going to kiss him and tell him that our time had come. It would have been a magical night.

But someone had invited Mario to the party, and from the moment I arrived, he kept looking at me with those kicked puppy eyes. And I ignored him and kept my attention completely on Gabriel, until Mario picked up a guitar and started playing some romantic song. It was probably my boredom with him that caused the events that followed. The song ended, and my legs started to move.

I wasn't in control, she was, without my permission, and she walked over to him and brushed a strand of hair that was falling over his eyes. When I regained control of her fingers, my fingers were still in that loser's hair. And everyone was watching. Gabriel was watching. I pulled my hand away quickly but the damage was already done.

She ruined my magical night, she ruined my first love.

Gabriel broke up with me on the porch where a year earlier he had kissed me for the first time. And I went to the street to catch an uber back home, too humiliated to stay at the party. I heard footsteps approaching, I expected it to be Gabriel saying he was sorry, or maybe Carla deciding to act like a good friend and come to comfort me. But no, it was the loser who was responsible for all the drama that came my way that night.

I walked over to him and I kissed him. In retrospect that probably would have been punishment enough for her, the girl inside me. But I have always believed that a strong punishment for a small transgression is the best method to prevent future transgressions. I grabbed his arm and led him to the motel I planned to take Gabriel to.

"Are you sure?" Mario asked incredulously when we were in front of the establishment.

"Yes." I said and kissed him again.

When we were in the room I kept kissing him and we took off our clothes. And almost out of breath I said:

"Can I tie you to the bed?"

"What?" he laughed.

"It's just something that has always been a fantasy of mine, you don't have to say yes."

"Do whatever you want to me, I want to make all your fantasies come true." I tied his right arm with my shirt, and his left with my pants. I took off his underwear and guided him into me. It hurt that first moment of penetration, but my heart hurt more.

Then I put my hands around his neck and started choking him, with his thing still inside me. He liked it a little at first, I could see it in his eyes. Then he stopped liking it and soon he stopped struggling, but that didn't matter.

Would I do it again if I knew I was going to get caught? Of course not, I'm not an idiot. But I had to show her who was boss.

I'm twenty-one now, and I live in a hospital in the countryside, and I'll probably be living here for a long time. A lot of people think what I said at the trial about this other girl living inside me was a lie from a horrible rich girl trying to plead insanity to

get away with murder, but those who knew me said it made sense. Carla said in her testimony that sometimes she felt like there was something dark living inside me. She still comes to visit me sometimes, although she always seems kind of tense during these visits, the last one she told me she was going to marry her idiot boyfriend who keeps cheating on her, I was bored by the conversation so I let the other girl take over midway through.

It's not the life I had imagined, but it's not so bad. We have art class, and walks in the garden, and the pills are good for when I get tired of hearing the girl inside me whine, though they never quite shut her up.

Lately she's been talking about giving herself a name, since I refuse to give her one, I think she wants to be something of her own, something apart from me. Which is really so delusional, it's amazing she hasn't learned what I learned all those years ago, that all she is, and all she'll ever be, is just a part of me.

The Girl at the Piano, The Woman in the Garden

Tiago's sister left the hall where the patriarch's birthday party was being held and went to the garden outside the mansion.

The older sister, the one Andréia, Tiago's fiancée, had never met before that night, despite having been visiting the Greniers' home for years, ever since she started dating the man she would soon marry. And it took months of dating until she found out about this other sister's existence. After all, she barely appeared in the photos spread across the walls and shelves, while the faces of her fiancé, and his other siblings, Patrick, his twin, and Graziela, the youngest, could be seen everywhere you looked.

And her name was only mentioned in whispers and usually only after the people whispering had a few glasses of wine.

Augusta Grenier, the sister who dropped out of college. The sister who had incidents with the police and a drug problem. The sister who appeared in YouTube videos doing strange things with varying levels of intoxication, filmed by both friends and random strangers. The sister who had appeared in a

video on Pornhub that was only taken down after Mr. Grenier reached a settlement with the site involving many lawyers and a lot of money exchanging hands. The sister who had a slew of crazy ex-boyfriends and even crazier ex-girlfriends. The sister who had been cut off from the family's money and left to fend for herself. The sister who hadn't come home in five years.

Andréia followed her, and in retrospect, remembering that day, she would say that it was mere curiosity that made her do it, the same kind of curiosity anyone would feel when faced with the black sheep of such a prestigious family. But at that moment, she only felt herself moving as if she were in a trance. The garden was large, with many bushes and trees, and in the center, there was a water fountain, and it was on the edge of the fountain that Augusta was sitting, with a cigarette in her mouth, looking at the starry sky.

“Did they send you to get me to go back in?”
Augusta asked.

“No, I just came to get some air. What about you?”

“Just avoiding arguments. If I smoked in front of the guests, my sweet mother would start talking about how I’m a bad example for Grazi.”

Andréia could see her mother-in-law’s point in this matter, but she didn’t say anything.

“Can I have one?”

“Sure.”

Augusta handed her a cigarette, and instead of lighting it with the lighter, she brought the tip of her cigarette closer to Andréia’s until the sparks passed.

And she smiled.

“What’s so funny?” Andréia asked.

“Just surprised, I never imagined that my little brother would date a smoker, and if he did, that my mother wouldn’t have convinced him to dump you right from the start.”

“Your mother doesn’t know I smoke. I only do it sometimes, and only when I’m away from his parents.”

“That explains it.”

“They were really shocked when you showed up earlier.”

Augusta laughed.

“I know, just the wide eyes and awkward silence made the trip worth it.”

“So where do you live now?”

“I’m not telling you that.”

“So can you at least tell me if you’re clean?”

“I took a shower earlier today.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I am clean, I have been for a few years now.”

“When your brother and I tried to guess why you didn’t come back, he always thought it was because you were too drugged out to come home.”

“Well, he was wrong. I even have a regular job, which would certainly shock them even more than my sudden appearance.”

“Why then?”

“Because this isn’t my home. The people in your family aren’t always your people, you know? And they made it very clear that there was no place for me here... She's not really my sister, you know, Graziela.”

“Hmm... Grazi is adopted?”

Andréia thought it made sense, she never asked Mrs. Glória's age, but she must have been approaching sixty, while little Graziela was barely ten. But she couldn't see the connection that this had with what Augusta was saying. And the way Augusta was talking seemed to indicate something else, some hidden subtext.

She smiled and said very slowly:

“No, she's me. I'm her.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Genetically at least, that's what I'm saying. When I started going down the wrong path, Mom and Dad decided to do it again. Raise me right this time, since they now had more time and patience. Or maybe to see if the girl would end up a disaster anyway, to know that it wasn't really their fault, that it was always going to end this way.”

“Why do you think that? Like, I know it's legal in Sweden and Canada but here it's still—”

“Yeah and my mom made a very convenient trip to Sweden some years ago, just a few months before Mini Me was born. I'm not just pulling this idea out of thin air, one day when she was about five I picked her up to take her to the movies, took some blood from her and used one of those paternity kits you can get online, sent the samples to the company that does the testing, and then they sent it back to me saying I must have sent the wrong one because the two samples I sent were identical.”

“Does Tiago know? Or Patrick?”

“I doubt it. No one really knows except you, me, my mother, my father and the doctors and lawyers, I believe. Our mother really wanted her to be baptized and to go to catechism and make her first

communion and all that stuff. And as far as I remember the Catholic Church has very strong opinions about whether or not it's okay to make copies of other people. And even their non-Catholic friends might have a problem with it. Cloning a son if he's dead or if someone needs a bone marrow transplant or something is one thing, cloning a daughter who's still alive and who you don't get along with is something else entirely."

"She goes to catechism, and she hates it. Almost as much as she hates piano lessons."

Augusta laughed.

"Good, I hated both too. At least that wasn't lost."

"But... why are you telling me all this?"

"I don't know, I think it's because I saw her, and all of them, for the first time in a long time and I needed to tell someone. If it was Tiago who had come after me it would probably have been him, or Patrick, or the waiter. But it was you."

"Maybe your parents did it because they missed having you around. Not to replace you."

“That’s a very sweet thought. You’re completely wrong of course, but it’s sweet. I can see why my brother likes you.”

“We’re getting married in three months, we’d love to have at the ceremony.”

“I’m afraid one family reunion is the most I can handle this year, but thanks for inviting me.”

“But why? You’ve already made contact, you’ve already met with them, the hardest step has already been taken. I know it’s your family and it’s none of my business, but-”

“Hey it’s okay, they’re more your family than mine at this point. But the thing is, I didn’t come here to be a part of their lives from now on, I came here to remind myself why I left in the first place. Sometimes you just have to do that.”

“And you remembered why?”

“Yeah. Man, they all saw me come to the garden, and you’re the only one who came after me. You were the only one who asked if I was clean, you didn’t laugh when I said I had a job. They think that

when it comes to me, they already have all the answers they need.”

Andréia just looked at her, not knowing what to say, what to feel.

“You really are sweet, I'm glad you're around them, we never had much of that in this house.”

Augusta then did something a little strange. A little strange, but lovely, Andréia thought. She stood up and gave her a light kiss on the cheek.

“I'm really glad I met you. My brother is a lucky man. Bye.”

And then she started walking away.

“Are you going back to the party?”

“No, I'm going back home.”

And she did. And Andréia stayed in the garden until she finished her cigarette.

When she returned to the living room Tiago came up to her and said:

“Honey, where have you been?”

“Just talking to your sister outside.”

“Augusta?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she has a job, and that she’s clean, and that-”

“She’s probably lying about everything, that’s what she does.”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Don’t worry about Augusta, she probably just came here to ask for money from our parents, the only surprising part is that it took her so long.”

Andréia thought about saying that she had actually already left, and without any money as far as she knew. But the words died in her mouth.

And before she could think of anything to say, someone tapped a fork on a glass to get the guests'

attention and said that little Graziela would now play a song on the piano in honor of her father. She saw the girl walk among the guests to the piano in the corner, looking as if she would rather be anywhere else, but still walking up to the instrument without protest.

The guests applauded when she sat on the bench, and then fell silent. Meanwhile, from afar, Andréia focused on Graziela's face. She would have liked to think that Tiago was right and that Augusta had lied about everything, but still, time was the only difference she could see in the face of the girl at the piano and the woman in the garden. Even the melancholy in her eyes was the same.

After the presentation ended and everyone clapped, she began to walk around the house, looking at the portraits spread across the walls, of her fiancé Tiago, his twin Patrick, and Graziela, his younger sister. Each time, her eyes immediately focused on the girl's face in the photographs and saw in her someone older than the one in the image recorded on the photo, a face of someone who had been broken and rebuilt on all the walls, wherever she looked.

And she didn't want to stop looking.

Familiar Ties

It was nearly midnight, and there was a scent of blood in the air.

This was not unusual in a place like that, though Lena supposed that on this occasion it was just a trick of her mind, or a premonition of things to come.

Earlier that day, she had taken young Mishka, the Marquise's granddaughter, to see her last sunset, and had also prepared her for her transformation, applying her makeup, combing her hair, and dressing her in a blood-red dress, as was tradition.

This would be the night Mishka would join the immortals, or it would be the night she would die. After all, there was always a chance that the transformation would not work and this would be her burial rather than a rebirth, though Mishka's chances seemed good. Both her mother and grandmother had survived the transformation.

Once a week, two people from the village over the age of fifteen were drawn and taken to the

Kerberian Castle, where they had some of their blood drunk and were then returned to the village with a bag full of coins for their contribution, and the promise that their names would not be drawn again until the end of the year. But with a newly transformed vampire, one could not count on such self-control, so Mishka was accompanied by three criminals who were originally going to die on the gallows who had been in the dungeons of the castle for the last few weeks.

This part in theory had not disturbed her much, these people were already marked for death and only those who had committed the worst crimes received the death sentence. However, earlier, after most of the other servants had gone to the village, she had been in charge of bringing the last meal to those who would be sacrificed. There were two men and a woman. One of the men took the plate and said that one day Lena would burn in hell. The other took the plate and threw it at her through the bars, shouting obscenities.

But the reaction that disturbed her the most was that of the woman, who almost shyly thanked her for the meal before going to the corner to eat the rice, liver steak and potatoes that had been given to her. And it was about her that Lena was thinking

that night as she accompanied her young Mistress through the garden.

Mishka was holding her hand, as she used to do on the rare occasions when Lena took her to the village when she was a child. Her face showed no fear, but her hand felt hot and sweaty, showing the apprehension that must have been in her heart. Her Mistress, Marquise Aliona and her daughter Oksana, were waiting in the garden.

This last presence had taken Lena by surprise when she had shown up at the castle a few days before with her latest conquest, announcing her intentions to be present for Mishka's transformation. Oksana had shown very little interest in her daughter over the past seventeen years, with the girl being placed in Lena's care practically since birth.

Oksana probably never thought that becoming a mother would be an option, the birth of the Marquise's granddaughter came as a surprise. It was rare for vampires to become pregnant, and if they did, to carry the pregnancy to term, but it was generally not seen as a problem. Before the Tsarina joined the immortals and was soon followed by the rest of the nobility, the situation was different, but with the great longevity that was now the norm for

the country's aristocracy, many of the rules of how the world worked had changed as well.

Is she here on the Marquise's orders? Or because she sees this moment as the true birth of her daughter? Is this the moment when she stops being my girl and starts being hers?

"Thank you Lena, you may go now." the Marquise said.

If it were up to her, Lena would stay with the girl until the last moment, but the Marquise's eyes warned her against even making such a request.

Aliona had small wrinkles around her stern eyes and looked about forty years old, something quite rare among the immortals. There were some noblemen who avoided the transformation for a few decades to have a more distinguished appearance, but young noblewomen were usually transformed at what was considered the peak of their beauty, usually between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Lena had always wondered why it had been different with Aliona, since such a custom had already been in custom when she was born, but she never asked the question out loud. Being a Familiar to a vampire

often meant being a confidant or advisor if required, but only if required.

And for Lena, being a vampire's Familiar was the only option at that point. The vast majority of those who served the immortals tended not to stay long, a life between light and shadows lost much of its glamour as the years passed, but she had stayed. Last spring Lena had turned 167 years old, and 142 of those had been spent serving Aliona and the rest of her family. And at that point, if she spent more than a few weeks without receiving blood from her Mistress or another vampire, she would begin to weaken and the signs of aging would begin to show. And surely in less than a year she would be dead and without anyone to care for her in her last months of life.

Perhaps a quick death would be preferable to such an end like this.

She kissed Mishka on the forehead, something she usually wouldn't do in the presence of others, a liberty a servant shouldn't take.

"Everything will be fine, your grandmother will take care of you and I'll see you in a few hours," she said.

Mishka nodded, and Lena forced herself to give a comforting smile, before letting go of her hand and starting her journey back to the castle.

She walked through the empty corridors until she heard footsteps behind her. She turned expecting to find Mishka behind her, frightened and asking for the comfort of her presence for a few more minutes, but instead it was Oksana.

"It was foolish of you to stay. You should have gone to the village to spend the night like Isobel." Oksana said.

It took a lot of self-control for Lena not to roll her eyes at the mention of Oksana's latest conquest. She had detested the woman from the first moment they were introduced, though the same could be said for all the other women and men Oksana had brought home over the years. Because once, a long time ago, Lena had been one of them.

"I promised Mishka that I would be by her side until the end."

A part of her thought of saying that Mishka would never hurt her, after all, Lena was the one who had raised her from the moment her mother had left her

there. But she knew the words would sound foolish to Oksana, and possibly with good reason.

“Promise or not, it was stupid.”

“Did you come here just to insult me?”

“No, I came to give you a gift.” She said and placed in her hand a small velvet bag that Lena had not noticed until that moment.

Lena opened the bag and found inside a small crucifix.

It was made of silver, one of the few materials that could harm a vampire, something that under normal circumstances would never be allowed to enter a vampire’s home.

“I can’t keep this. Your mother would kill me if she found something like this among my things.”

“Then throw it in the river, but do it tomorrow in the sunlight. If not for me or yourself, do it for her, the poor girl doesn’t deserve to start her life killing the one she loves the most.”

“Alright.”

Oksana didn't say anything else, she just turned around and started walking towards the garden. And Lena went to her room and locked the door.

She assumed she would spend the whole night awake, but against her expectations she was able to fall asleep mere minutes after lying down in bed. When she woke up, it was still dark outside, and someone was banging on the door loudly. And this time there was no mistaking the smell of blood in the air.

“Open up! Please open up!” Mishka said between frantic knocks on the bedroom door.

A child looking for its mother or a creature looking for its next meal? She didn't know.

Lena held the silver crucifix, and heard the hinges on the door begin to give way.

Taken by the light

On the day Agnessa, born in the year 1337 after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, was taken by the angels, she had woken up before dawn and had already gone to the stables to milk the cows.

If it had been up to her, she would have stayed longer in the bed she shared with the other servants of the great house. It was still autumn, but at that time one could already feel the winds of the winter that was to come. But the master always insisted on having fresh milk for breakfast, and Catherine had already done that same task the day before.

She was almost reaching the stables when a golden light set over her and her body began to rise towards the carriage in the sky.

Her eyes closed because of the intensity of the light, and somehow, when she opened them again, she was at a table, and there were angels above her.

The angels were not like the ones in the paintings and stained glass windows of the church she went to every Sunday, with blond hair, blue eyes and wings that looked like clouds, nor were they what the priest used to say in sermons when he talked

about lion heads and a thousand eyes that could see beyond the flesh to the center of someone's soul.

The angels that came to Agnessa had only two eyes on their heads although they were large and completely black, they had no hair or fur, their skin was grayish, and they wore no clothes, but between their legs they were smooth, which confirmed to Agnessa that they were pure creatures.

"Be not afraid." They said in a voice that went straight to her head.

Quite unnecessary, but still she nodded, there was another light above her and she felt it envelop her and carry her to a gentle unconsciousness.

She woke up later to the sound of birds singing and saw green in front of her, but not that of the farm's pastures, but rather that of a beautiful garden with fruit trees and beautiful flowers with intense colors that usually only showed themselves in the height of spring. She was without her clothes, and for a second she felt the urge to cover herself. Until she remembered that Adam and Eve didn't need clothes when they were still allowed inside Eden.

Exploring the place, Agnessa found a waterfall, and huts where the others who had been chosen by the angels were sleeping. And the glass walls where it was possible to see the angels passing by on the other side or looking at her with the same interest she felt for the creatures of heaven. The only thing she didn't find was the birds whose song she continued to hear.

Later the other people in the garden told her that one day, hundreds of years in the future, the creatures from heaven would return to Earth and all humans would be taken by the golden light and then placed in beautiful gardens like this one, where they would spend the rest of their lives without disease, poverty or suffering with the angels watching over them from the other side of the glass. And she and the other ones who had been chosen would help them reach this noble goal.

Blessed be the beautiful future of humanity.

Courage Test

There is a woman who lives in the swamp waters, everyone in the village knew about it. Some said she was half frog, others half crocodile. Some said she looked just like a girl, others that her face was like that of Yana, the oldest woman in the village. The only thing that didn't change was her gender, she was always a woman among the dark water.

Some said that if you manage to catch her she will grant you a wish in exchange for her freedom, others that she will simply swallow you whole as punishment for daring to bother her, like a snake does with a mouse. Mei had heard this last story from her older brother who loved to scare her and pointed out that it didn't make much sense that the woman would have to be a giant to be able to do this to a person and was quite pleased when he called her a killjoy. But that night she dreamed of a giant woman emerging from the black water, grabbing her by the legs and swallowing her whole.

Mei was thinking about it again now, months after hearing the story, as her boat went deeper into the swamp. She could still hear the voices of the boys on the shore, some telling her to turn back, others to keep rowing if she had the courage. None of them

had gone as far as she had, but she had to go deeper, because to prove for them that she was as brave as any boy she had to prove that she was more, Mei had known for a long time that unfortunately it always worked that way.

Eventually their voices faded, but there was still the one in her head that wanted to prove itself. She also wanted to discover the truth about the woman who lived in the swamp for herself, even with the chance of being swallowed alive still in the back of her mind. *Maybe I'm not really brave, just insane*, Mei thought as she continued to row.

A few more minutes of rowing, and she saw lotus flowers in the water, in shades of white and pink even though it wasn't anywhere near their blooming season. If the boys were around she wouldn't dare show interest in something simply because it was beautiful and delicate for fear of ridicule, but there alone she reached out her hand to the flowers and touched the petals with her fingertips.

And then she felt something pull her arm out of the boat and into the water. Then she felt something strong and long wrap itself around her body and her neck making it impossible for her to move, lifting her until her face was on the surface.

Just her face.

She breathed as deeply as she could but the air didn't seem to want to pass through her compressed body.

And a few seconds later she saw the face of a woman emerge from the black water.

The Woman who lived in the swamp seemed older than Mei. But only by about five years, ten at most. Definitely not as old as Yana. She had long black hair that clung to her pale skin when wet.

Mei looked the woman straight in the eyes and said with difficulty:

"Are you going to eat me?"

The swamp woman laughed. Mei felt the thing wrapped around her body relax a little, not enough for her to move but enough for her to breathe and speak without much difficulty.

"No. You don't look particularly tasty. Why would you come here if you thought being eaten was a possibility?"

“I was challenged.”

“Do you always do everything you’re challenged to do?”

“No, not everything.”

“Explain your criteria to me.”

“Well, I’m not going to accept something like eating poop just because someone challenged me, I accept challenges that prove I’m strong and brave.”

“Because you’re afraid you’re not, right? You’re afraid they’re right. Don’t try to deny it, I can see your heart. I can hear their voices in your head, calling you weak and pathetic. Just another little girl.”

“Stop.”

“That’s a very rude thing to say. It almost makes me want to send you away before I grant you your wish.”

“Do you really grant wishes?”

“Only the right wishes.”

“Gold would be a wrong wish, right?”

“Yes, it would.”

“And eternal life?”

“Nothing lives forever, girl.”

“It’s Mei. My name is Mei, not girl.”

“Right, Mei, nothing lives forever.”

“Not even you?”

“Not even me.”

“Having boys waiting for me to see me as brave as I really am, would that be a wrong wish too?”

“Not exactly, that would be a wish I could grant if you wanted, but it doesn’t seem like the right wish. Is that really what you want? Do you really want to be called brave by the boys in your village, or do you want to be the thing that strikes fear into their hearts?”

She had never considered the second option before. But now she did, and she wanted it.

“The second option.”

“Your wish will be granted, Mei.”

And Mei felt the darkness of the swamp swallow them both, with fear in her heart of what would come next but also curiosity.

She lost consciousness.

And she woke up under the dark water of the swamp, but she wasn't drowning, the water felt good, it felt like home.

Mei thrust her face up to the surface with a body much larger and stronger than the one she had come in with. There was no one around. Just her and the lotus flowers floating in the dark water.

She saw her hands, much paler than before. And she could see the body underneath. And the people in the village were all wrong, the woman who lived in the swamp wasn't half frog or half crocodile. She was half snake.

This would be the moment in the story where the weak little girl would scream in horror. Mei knew this. That she did instead was smile, thinking of how she could wrap her long pale body around a person's body and watch them struggle to keep breathing and see the light of life drain from their eyes if she so desired. Mei thought it would feel good. Maybe it was the snake part of her talking, maybe it was something that had been living inside her all along.

She would have to wait until someone was brave enough to go into the swamp to find out. She hoped it would be one of the boys who told her to keep rowing. Until then she' would just keep swimming through the flowers.

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. .

On the other side of the swamp the woman wearing Mei's face rowed to the shore where the boys waited. She wasn't feeling particularly guilty. She gave the girl what she wanted and from what she could see in her heart Mei would like this life for a while and eventually the swamp would show the girl its secrets like it had shown her so long ago.

"How far did you go?" one of the boys asked as she got out of the boat.

"Just a little further, there are pretty flowers along the way, you should check them out sometime."

"Oh, did the little girl get distracted by the flowers? How cute," another boy said.

"Yes," she said.

She realized she was tired of that conversation. For the first time in a long time the woman who lived in the swamp had legs and she intended to use them. So without giving any explanations she ran out of the swamp and towards the village, and for a long time she could still hear the boys' voices behind her.

But she didn't care enough to pay attention to what they were saying.

She just kept running.

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